

## Knoydart Overnighter, June 2014

*Sue Chalmers*

The Knoydart peninsula evokes respect, even awe, in hillwalking circles. The area has a reputation for remoteness and for a certain independence of spirit. Returning from fighting in the Second World War the “seven men of Knoydart” staked a claim to a few acres of their own land, only to be taken to court and dispossessed by the then owner, the Nazi sympathiser Lord Brockett. After many twists and turns, the estate finally came into community ownership in 1999 when it was purchased by the Knoydart Foundation, a partnership of local residents, the Highland Council, Chris Brasher Trust and the John Muir Trust.

When I joined the Cairngorm Club in 2010, I found the the prospect of going on a weekend meet to the White House at Barisdale rather daunting. With a few more years of hillwalking under my boots, I was delighted to have the opportunity to discover Knoydart on the club overnighter in June 2014.

Eleven of us assembled at around midday at the quayside in Mallaig, (Fig.2). The weather was reasonable but, mindful of the MWIS forecast of “extensive or persistent cloud, base between 350 and 550m coastal areas ... chance of cloud-free Munros less than 10%”, we didn’t expect that to last. Our departure for Loch Hourn aboard “The Venturer” was enlivened by a pipe band (which was



**Figure 1** *Easy going.*



**Figure 2** *The Overnighter party at Mallaig. From left to right; Adrian Scott, Michael Culley, Ivan Hiscox, Gordon Stalker, Bruce Manning, Ken Thomson, Neil Chalmers, Matt Parkes (guest), Debbie Fielding, Benn Hitchen and Sue Chalmers.*

really there for the local food festival). There was some anxiety about how we would disembark on to the peninsula but, in the event, we easily clambered out on to the rocks on Fraoch Eilan which was not in fact an island, but connected to the shore by a strip of sand. As we walked beside Barisdale Bay, the sun was shining and we dared to hope that MWIS had got it wrong, (Fig.2).

After twenty minutes or so, the parties went their separate ways with Gordon Stalker heading for his Corbett of Sgurr a Choire Bheith ("peak of the corrie with birches") and Adrian Scott and Benn Hitchen for Sgurr na Ciche ("peak of the nipple"). The rest of us headed for Ladhar Bheinn (pron. Larven, meaning "prong hill") via man-high and tick-harboured bracken until we rounded the shoulder into Coire Dharrcail.

The climb up to Stob a Choire Odhair was tough-going but frequent attempts at wild flower identification distracted some of us. "Sedges have edges, rushes are round and grasses are hollow right up from the ground", said Debbie, and she should know as she's an ecologist by profession. Whether or not our identification attempts were accurate, the sight of so many beautiful flowers added greatly to this part of the walk.

By the time we reached the summit of Ladhar Bheinn at around 18:00, (Figs.3&4), differences in age and fitness were showing and we split into two groups. Neil Chalmers, Ken Thomson (upon whose account of the expedition this article has drawn considerably) and I proceeded at a more leisurely pace, stopping to brew up on the way down to Mam Barrisdale. Here we made the decision to continue to Luinne Bheinn (rather than retreat to Inverie) and we reached the summit cairn at around midnight. We bivvied high up on the ridge and the voices we heard in the darkness turned out not to be a figment of our imaginations but those of the faster, younger party bivvying at the col just below us.

It was a dry and calm night so I slept soundly, and it was exhaustion after the day's exertions, rather than lack of sympathy, which caused us to ignore (apparently) Ken's howls of pain caused by leg cramps. After leaving our bivvy site at around 05:00, we reached our final summit of the weekend, Meal Buidhe by 08:00. Then it was all downhill and into the Camusrory estate in eager anticipation of a cup of tea in the the bothy whilst we waited for our



**Figure 3&4** *Ladhar Bheinn summit ridge.*

ship to come in. We were disappointed. The rather unwelcoming occupants of Camusrory denied all knowledge of a bothy and made it quite clear that the jetty where we hoped to be picked up was private. We set off for it anyway in the hope of meeting up with the rest of the party but found only midges.

Ken walked back down the path and encountered Camusrory estate owner, Rupert Soames, complete with cigar, and then Adrian and Benn, fresh from Sgurr na Ciche, and finally the rest of party hiding from the midges in bivvy bags and midge-nets on a promontory near the pier. So we all joined them and waited in slackening wind and gathering midgies for the boat, distracted only by the sight of the proprietor's boat being manoeuvred into a position

which made it impossible for "The Venturer" to use the jetty. Thus we had to clamber over yet more grass tussocks, bog and bracken to embark off rocks.

There was more than one nodding head on the boat back. After a quick change of clothes at Mallaig, we boarded the minibus and fell asleep again, except of course for our valiant drivers, Ken and Adrian.

So another memorable overnigher came to an end. The establishment of the Knoydart Foundation ensures that this remote and beautiful landscape will continue to be enjoyed by all who venture there for many years to come. It is disappointing that the Foundation's neighbours do not share the same generosity of spirit. Nevertheless, it had been, as usual, a weekend of good company, the odd navigational error (mine) and a great sense of achievement. I, for one, am looking forward to the club's next Knoydart meet in April 2015.